

Software to Manage Vital Statistics and Municipal Budgets

2000-06-14

Cheikh Thiam (WARO)

Vacationing in Senegal one August, Nafissatou was unable to procure the birth certificate she needed for an administrative file. She finally returned to Paris, where she has lived since 1977, without the document, which should have been issued to her by the main Vital Statistics Centre in Dakar. Her disappointment was matched by her anger when the clerk told her that records for the years 1958 to 1960 have been virtually destroyed.

Her only hope now is the centre in Nantes, France, where duplicate copies of the records in the main centre in Dakar are kept, for births dating back to at least April 1960. Many other people in Dakar born in the same period have experienced the same situation, which could have been avoided if the centre's records were computerized. This is why local elected officials were especially interested during demonstrations of vital statistics management software developed by the Société Africaine d'Education et de Formation pour le Développement (SAFEFOD), a Senegalese NGO. The new software facilitates the administration of vital statistics; the maintenance of birth, marriage, and death records; and the management of official documents.

Financial software

Other software developed by SAFEFOD, also as part of the International Development Research Centre's Acacia Initiative, is used in budget management and helps local elected officials to plan, execute, and manage the finances of their communities, and to prepare financial statements. This application permits real-time entry of accounting data. And at the end of each budget cycle, it readily compiles a municipality's various financial reports.

Moreover, the timely production of annual administrative accounts for each municipality offers better prospects for the sound management of local communities. Mayoral jurisdictions, in particular, often have budget management problems. And in many cases, the administrative account — the basic tool that provides a statement of revenue and expenditure — is available only after a delay of more than a year. Only about 10% of *communes* or rural districts manage to prepare such a document. This explains the strong interest of local communities in Senegal in the budget management software.

Software training

SAFEFOD has organized an initial devolution session on lab results for members of the ICTs and Governance Group of the Acacia Initiative in Senegal. This was followed by another session that brought in local elected representatives and Senegal's Minister of Decentralization. At both sessions, there was a presentation on the web site of SAFEFOD's local server, but it was the demonstration of the capabilities of the budget and vital statistics software that most interested the local representatives. According to Professor Yéro Sylla, Executive Secretary of SAFEFOD, their intense interest in the software presentation was due to the fact that they recognized, in his words, "powerful tools to support the computerized management of local communities."

The devolution process will continue. Training seminars on the new software have already been organized for the Ngor, Point E, and Guédiawaye districts, among others, where two people in each community will receive the training: those responsible locally for budget and vital statistics management.

Field testing

Professor Sylla says the next step is to install the software in the local mayors' offices for field testing and validation, and after that, "the Acacia program will enable us to move on to other targeted local communities in the Thiès and Louga regions." He adds that the Agence de Développement Municipal (ADM), a body established by the Government of Senegal to support the decentralization process, has also shown keen interest in the software. Demonstrations have been arranged for ADM officials and local representatives in the city of Dakar and the *communes* of Joal-Fadiouth and Kaffrine.

The enthusiasm with which the mayors have greeted the new software has been most gratifying for SAFEFOD, which is still refining the applications using suggestions eagerly offered by the mayors. These tools will eventually enable local communities to reach out and grasp the new information and communication technologies that will reinforce Senegal's decentralization policies.

Cheikh Thiam, Journalist, Dakar